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ABSTRACT

A study explored the debate over comic books and children in the 1950s, addressing the communication role of comic books in forming a new community of comic book fans during that period. Using E.C. (Educational Comics) comic books as a case study, the conventions of the comic books, correspondence between producers and consumers, and articles by anti-comic book critics were examined to analyze how the comics contributed to what critics perceived as a new community of children and youth distinct from the dominant community to which they belonged. The comic book "crusade" was one manifestation of the anxiety felt by many adults over the communications revolution of the 1950s. Reader response theory was used to study the comic books' reception by fans and critics alike--the theory insists that readers bring meaning to text, and that the audience is central to understanding. Every issue published between 1950 and 1954 of 3 comics--"The Vault of Horror," "The Haunt of Fear," and "Tales from the Crypt"--was examined. In addition, over 500 letters from readers published in E.C. horror comics were examined, as were articles by anti-comic book crusaders in popular magazines of the period. Children were considered "innocent" and malleable in the 1950s, and many middle-class parents, wishing to protect their children, saw comic books as a threat to family values. Adults could not understand youth's interpretation of the comics, and many saw their children rejecting high culture and other intellectual pursuits in favor of comics. (Contains 37 references; a comic book story is appended.) (NKA)

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ED 387 852

"Why Won't You Just Read It?": Comic Books and Community in the 1950s

Introduction

Cultural critic Robert Warshow devoted his June, 1954 *Commentary* column, "The Study of Man," to a rather unusual topic -- his son Paul's devotion to comic books published by E.C. comics. Warshow's discussion of his son's reading habits summarizes the hopes and fears of many 1950s parents, who feared that their children had been "seduced" by comic books.

> Paul, I think, does not quite take [the Fan-Addict Club] with full seriousness, but it is clear that he does in some way value his membership in it, at least for the present . . . He has recruited a few of his schoolmates into the organization. If left free to do so, he will buy any comic book which bears the E.C. trademark, and is usually quite satisfied with the purchase. This is not a matter of "loyalty," but seems to reflect some real standard of discrimination; he has occasionally sampled other comic books which imitate the E.C. group and finds them inferior. . .
>
> . . . I know that I don't like the comics myself and that it makes me uncomfortable to see Paul reading them . . .
>
> I said once that the gross and continual violence of the comic books was objectionable.
>
> He said: "What's so terrible about things being exciting?"
>
> Well, nothing really; but there are books that are much more exciting, and the comics keep you from reading the books . . .
>
> Why read the comics at all? . . . Oh, the comics are just stupid, that's all, and I don't see why you should be wasting so much time with them.
>
> Maybe they're stupid sometimes. But look at this one. This one is really good. Just read it! Why won't you just read it?
>
> Usually I refuse to "just read it," but that puts me at once at a disadvantage. How can I condemn something without knowing what it is? . . . (596)

Warshow's article summarizes the unspoken apprehensions of the comic book critics of the early 1950s. His inability to "just read it," his concession that he does not glean the same meaning from the comic books as Paul does, demonstrates his belief that Paul and other comic book readers

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belonged to a separate community who interpreted the meaning of the books differently than adult critics. Indeed, the divergent reading of comic books by adult critics and young fans was at the heart of an active anti-comic crusade that stretched from the 1930s through the mid-1950s, ending only with the creation of the Comics Code and the "Seal of Approval" that still appears on the covers of many mainstream comic books today.

This paper is about the debate over comic books and children in the late 1940s and 1950s. It addresses the role of one form of communication, comic books, in forming a new community, of comic book fans, during that period. Using E.C. comic books as a case study, this paper examines the conventions of the books, correspondence between producers and consumers, and articles by anti-comic book critics in order to examine how the books contributed to what those critics perceived as a new community of children and youth that was distinct from the dominant community to which they belonged. Research questions include: what evidence exists that E.C. comics worked to create a community of readers? What were the values espoused by this community, and were they significantly different than the community of comic book critics? What evidence exists that these critics perceived these values differently?

The argument here is the battle over the comic books provides evidence to demonstrate that children and other comic book fans were forming a new community of which their parents were not a part, and comic books were but one mediator of that community. Those who fought comic books, like Robert Warshow, said that they objected to the books' contents. But the stories were not the matter over which they waged their campaign; instead, the battle was over *meaning*. Anti-comic book forces fought the ways

in which the different segments in the anti-comic crusade, producers, young fans, and critics, used and decoded the comic books.

Literature Review

The battle over comic books provides, as a case study, an opportunity for the application of alternative theoretical approaches to mass communication history. This paper applies concepts of "community," "community boundaries," and related concepts from cultural studies and literary theory to anti-comic book arguments, comic book content, and communication between publishers and readers to reveal how a new community of readers was formed and was perceived as diverging so significantly from non-readers' values that it appeared threatening and subversive of post-war culture.

The concept of community is central to this paper. The argument is that within a society, defined as the totality of all the communities in a particular place in a given historical moment, there are many communities that may have different values. This idea comes from the work of international studies scholar Benedict Anderson (1978), who studied nations as what he called "imagined communities," groups formed when people imagine themselves sharing common interpretations of mass-communicated symbols. When people interpret and define symbols as they think others do, they imagine themselves part of a community that shares not only interpretation, but meaning and values, as well. According to Anderson, such communities are

> imagined because even the members of the smallest . . . will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives their communion. . . . In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face context (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be

> distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined (6-7).

There is one community, however, whose values are dominant and reflect the hegemony of the moment. The dominant community is but one imagined community, circulating within a society comprised of many imagined communities. The primary difference between it and others, however, is that it *is* dominant -- its ideas, meanings, and definitions of language have been anointed with the label of "common sense" because they represent the interests of hegemony during a given historical moment.

The definition of hegemony used here comes from Raymond Williams (rep. 1989) and Stuart Hall (1986). Williams, first, defines hegemony as the "common sense" practices of a society, the "central effective, and dominant system of meanings and values . . . which are organized and lived" (383). But no hegemony is permanent. Hall notes that it is a context-specific, multi-dimensional process. It is "a very particular, historically specific, and temporary 'moment' in the life of a society," and thus must be "actively constructed and positively maintained" (15). Anti-comic book crusaders, who vigorously worked to censor their children's and other fans' reading of the comic books, participated in the hegemony of the 1950s and were members of what will be called here the dominant community. While comic book fans may also have participated in that hegemony at other moments, during the times that they actively expressed their devotion to the comic books and the comic book community they were members of an oppositional community whose values were determined by members of the dominant community to be subversive to their own. Studying the relationship between comic books and their reception illuminates this conflict within the society of the 1950s and broadens the investigation from

analysis of an object's contents to an analysis of its reception and the meanings attributed to it. This debate also provides an opportunity to observe the ways that different communities created different meanings for the books based on their own beliefs and values.

Mass communication scholars have long grappled with the role of communication in forming communities. From John Dewey and his Chicago School colleagues (for example, Peirce as summarized in West, 1989; Dewey, 1916; Park, 1923); to Hanno Hardt (1975), Garth Jowett (1976), and Stuart Hall (1982), many have probed the roles of consumers' interactions with and interpretations of symbols in creating new cultural boundaries. Janice Radway's (1985) pioneering work on female romance readers, *Reading the Romance*, used a combination of research traditions to discuss the romance readers' community. But communication scholars have yet to examine past interpretative relationships between consumers and producers of communication. Instead of focusing on community as "a social process defined in and by communication" (Hardt, 1975, 84), these studies have concentrated on effects that communication might have had on consumers (Wartella, 1982).

Communication theorist Hanno Hardt suggests that communication is central to the construction of reality, and therefore must be studied as a process that defines community boundaries. As such, he says, communication focuses not only on people, but "upon the relationship among people," that "communication as an act of participation in or sharing of reality with others provides the dimensions for community and society as levels of social interaction" (81-85). Historian Garth Jowett also suggests that communication has the ability to create national identity through social

interaction, and to develop "emotional bonds" that created a "geographically extended common culture" (5-7).

But following what historian Warren Susman (1984) called the "communications revolution" of the late nineteenth century, imagined communities formed by communication became more disparate. The invention of new communication technologies, coupled with some communities' reception to the more rapid movement of people and ideas, led to a shift in the conception of communication. As a result of this revolution, Susman argues that *mass* communication developed, with its capacity for sustaining cultural myths or altering those myths as the culture demanded (1984a, 257). Further, this process created the basis for formation of communities of a new order, composed of those who shared similar interpretations of symbols and events via mass communicated messages. During the 1920s and 1930s these imagined communities grew, surpassing those of geographic proximity. Mass communication forms like radio, movies, and magazines reshaped traditional community bounds and traditional ideas of community. By the 1920s, according to Susman, many Americans perceived a change in the structure of their worlds based on "rapid accumulation of new knowledge and new experiences" (1984b, 106). Some of the nation's most prominent thinkers then started to express concern about the effects of the communication revolution. The "Chicago School" theorists, for example, believed that modern communication technologies were in part responsible for destroying spatial boundaries of community.[1] They

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[1]Loss of community was a central concern motivating John Dewey's work in education and pedaogy, for example. See, for example, Robert Westbrook's (1991) biography of Dewey, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press). Historian Cornel West (1989) has traced this concern regarding community to G.H. Mead and C.S. Peirce, as well in his *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Geneology of Pragmatism* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press).

recognized that new communal boundaries were drawn when people shared similar meanings encoded in cultural symbols, and that the communication revolution significantly affected Americans' definitions of community. "Face to face" communication acquired a different meaning, particularly with the advent of radio; rather than meaning shared interpretations of symbols articulated by two people in visual contact, it meant shared interpretation of symbols across distances. Those who felt excluded from these new communities were distressed, although they may not have understood why -- a new social order threatened to leave them out of touch be eroding the traditional bases on which some identity and connectedness with others were formed.

This distress is nowhere more evident than in the thirteen studies of motion pictures published as the Payne Fund Studies in 1933. Each of the studies focused on a different aspect of the effects of movies on children. In the end, most of the researchers conducting them concluded that movies did affect the way children behaved and interpreted their worlds. Studies like the Payne Fund's suggested that many American were becoming aware that their worlds were being reordered and redefined. It was in the 1930s, according to Susman, that Americans "discovered" the idea of culture. They were becoming aware that their "values and symbols" and the way people "thought and felt about things" were changing, and of the notion that different cultures appealed to different people. During this decade, in fact, the phrase "the American way of life" as a certain culture emerged, indicating that some Americans, at least, wished to maintain *one* imagined community (1984c, 154-157). This heightened sense of awareness about culture and the ensuing debates that it caused resulted in the crisis of the 1950s, when Americans were so aware of their own situations and anxieties that, Susman

argues, they recognized the paradoxes with which they existed and labeled their own time as an "age of anxiety" (1990, 23).

The comic book crusade under study here was one manifestation of that anxiety, a symptom of the concern over community initiated, in part, by the communications revolution. Parents of the 1950s who crusaded against the comic books were not part of the community that defined the new meanings associated with those symbols; however, they were likely a part of the community which recoded symbols offered by the movies and radio. Similarly, many members of the generation of children who formed a new community of comic book readers in the 1950s probably found themselves alienated from a new community of the 1970s and '80s that found new meanings in symbols offered by new styles of music and television.

To study the comic book debate, reception of the books by fans and critics alike was studied using methods from reader-response theory. One of that theory's main contributions to the analysis of text, according to Jane Tompkins (1980), is that it advocates the study of how meaning is created by readers. It insists that readers bring meaning to text, and that the study of audience is central to understanding the "meaning" of an artifact. The subjective nature of reality is implicit in both reader-response and cultural studies theories; both suggest that it is defined by audience and framed by culture. The debate over comic books under examination in this work reinforces these ideas, for the "reality" presented by parents was not the "reality" of either readers or producers, and vice-versa. Evidence from writings of anti-comic crusaders on one side, and from producers and fans on the other, show that it was the interpretation of reality, not reality itself, that was at issue. In order to study the debate, several sources were used. First, the books themselves. To discuss the community formed by producers and fans

of comic books, I examined every issue of three comic books published by E.C. Comics between 1950 and 1954 (when the books ceased publication) -- *The Vault of Horror, The Haunt of Fear,* and *Tales from the Crypt.* They were chosen because, according to a previous study (Barker, 1984), E.C.'s stories were the ones most frequently cited for causing harmful effects to children. Later, one of the stories published in these books will be discussed more extensively. In addition, I examined over 500 letters from readers published in E.C. horror comics between 1950 and 1954. I was also fortunate to find three issues of the Fan-Addict Bulletin, E.C.'s fan club newsletter, for this study. To discuss the community of anti-comic book crusaders, I located all articles published in popular magazines between 1950 and 1954 using the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* for those years. The results of this work reveal that a new community was formed between readers and publishers, defined by parents and others who objected to the books.

Cultural Context: The 1950s

The 1950s are sometimes misrepresented as a decade relatively free of conflict. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that they were a time when cultural tensions seethed just below the surface of national life. In order to contextualize the debate over comic books, it is important to examine this period, particularly their conceptions of and concerns about children.

Historian James Gilbert (1986) has linked the debate over comic books to a wider debate over youth culture that raged through this decade, for the idea of a culture designed for and marketed to the young also evolved during this period. While its products were many, the idea of a "youth culture" was largely propagated by one man, entrepreneur Eugene Gilbert (no relation). He was the first to realize the enormous potential of teens with disposable

income and worked to convince advertisers that this new audience was worth grooming not only to purchase products for adults, but ones developed especially for youth. As Gilbert created and cultivated this market, he worked to show middle-class parents that, far from advocating the abandonment of adult-centered values, youth culture merely extended them to a new generation. He tried to demonstrate to parents how the products and activities of this new group were not unlike products and activities that they had embraced. Historian Gilbert argues that Eugene Gilbert tried to show parents that youth culture was not subversive of their own, it "was merely a different, independent variant of adult culture, harmless and fundamentally normal" (207-208). But as the crusade against comic books demonstrates, Gilbert's strategies were unsuccessful. Parents insisted that the books, like other forms of youth culture, worked to create a community whose values subverted their own.

Before examining the threat of comic books defined by middle-class parents, three issues must be addressed: the definition of "child" during the 1950s, including how childrens' roles were defined and framed by middle-class parents; why children were so important to this post-war culture; and finally, what values middle-class children were expected to internalize and carry on to a new generation.

The primary characteristic of the middle-class child of the 1950s was innocence. Parents typically described their children as compassionate, curious, naive, and well-intentioned. According to historian Mark West (1988), childrens' value systems were perceived as either "totally malleable," or pure and innocent until corrupted by society. Thus, even properly indoctrinated children lacked fully developed value systems and thus required protection from harmful influences. It was this archetypal innocent

child that parents of the 1950s wanted to protect. Historian Paul Boyer (1985) argues that one reason that parents of this era were so anxious to protect their children had to do in part with the atomic bomb. "What now," Boyer says that 1950s adults asked, "were the prospects for the very survival of the human species" (279-280)? One partial remedy was children. As a character in the 1946 film, "Mr. Adam," said, "Man's only link with immortality is through his children. That's why we want the world to keep having babies." Historian Elaine Tyler May (1988) reiterates this remedy when she defines the ideal middle-class post war home as one "filled with children" that would "create a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation. Children would . . . be a connection to the future and a means of replenishing [the] world . . . In secure postwar homes with plenty of children, American women and men might be able to ward off their nightmares and live out their dreams" (23-24).

To discuss the threat middle-class parents believed comic books posed to this consensus, it is also necessary to describe additional values attached to family and family roles. First, family life was at its core. According to May, mothers and fathers assumed "traditional" roles: women were responsible for the "internal" world of family, men for the "external" world of work. The suburban world in which these families lived, according to Delores Hayden (1984), were remarkably homogeneous. Community policies excluded single parents, minorities, and the poor from most suburban housing developments (10). Virtually all suburban families, therefore, were middle class. According to historian Ronald Oakley (1985), parents were between 25 and 35 years old, had one or two small children, and were probably college educated (115). Families valued loyalty -- to the smaller organization (the family) or the larger (the corporation), stability, authority, and consumerism. In fact, May

says, these families sought nothing less than a kind of domestic containment: "secure jobs, secure homes, and secure marriages in a secure country. Security would enable them to take advantage of the fruits of prosperity and peace that were, at long last, available" (13). In this version of containment the "sphere of influence" was the home, where dangerous forces could be shut out, and it in this context that the comic book debate occurred. The suburbs of the 1950s, where parents fought desperately to isolate their children from values that they perceived as dangerous, carried personal and familial self-sufficiency to an extreme. Due to the perception of children as innocent and malleable, their parents tried in some ways to shut them off from society and contain them in the suburbs. Their crusade was to preserve their values and protect them from what they believed would lure children away from this suburban way of life.

Publishers to Readers: E.C. Comic Books and Their Fans

The perception by anti-comic book crusaders that the comic books were reaching out to children to form a community was not without basis in fact. One important basis for community formation is according special status to the audience, and E.C. worked hard to do that. E.C. worked on what might today be called a "shoestring budget," but its publisher, William Gaines (who went on to publish *Mad* magazine after the comics under study here were forced out of business by the Comics Code) managed to create a substantial following for the books. E.C. was the first comic book company to create a fan club for its readers and Gaines actively solicited correspondence from them. Communication between readers and producer shows that editors, artists, and writers assumed that children understood much more than many parents believed. Both Fan-Addict Club solicitations and *The Fan Addict Club Bulletin*, circulated by E.C. to all members, addressed children as "monsters"

and not as impressionable "babes." They appealed to readers' humor and savvy. Thus, a call for new members (appendix A) read: "so all right! So here's my two bits. So make me a member, already, and send me the things and stuff like what the kid up there got . . . so!" The "kid" was pictured walking down a drawbridge of a house, walls of which were built from ghouls, vampires, hanged men, and assorted monsters. The "kid" himself had pointed teeth, sloppy hair, big feet, and torn clothing. They also tried to mobilize the community to support their sales. This appeal appeared in a 1953 *Fan-Addict Club Bulletin* :

> FAVOR: How would you like to be a road-man for E.C.? How would you like to have a hand in increasing our sales, and insuring our continued
> success? . . . You can, with very little effort, help us get better display . . . Everytime [sic] you pass your newsstand, fish out the E.C.'s from the bottom of the piles or racks and put 'em up on top or front . . . BUT PLEASE, YOU MONSTERS, DO IT NEATLY! And if your newsdealer does not carry all the E.C. titles, ask him to order them from his wholesaler . . . BUT PLEASE, YOU MONSTERS, DO IT POLITELY!

The conception of children as "little monsters" with highly developed senses of humor who were attracted to and knowledgeable about the macabre was not one held by the post-war consensus.

The letters columns established other conventions that contributed to the formation of a community between the books and their fans. Letters, promptly printed, provide substantial evidence of a community of readers. Between 1950 and 1954, when they ceased publication, the three horror titles printed more than 500 letters from readers that shared in similar conventions. One convention in *Tales, Haunt*, and *Vault* was an established, unique communication routine. Each comic book had a narrator/keeper -- *A Haunt of Fear* had the Old Witch, *The Vault of Horror* had the Vault Keeper, and *Tales from the Crypt* the Crypt Keeper. Letters were addressed these

narrators, not the editors. Second, the letters generally fell into eight categories that can be defined as inviting, incorporating, and defining readers into the new community: appeals to readers to trade back issues; club appeals, seeking other reader to form clubs (before the Fan-Addict Club); votes on favorite stories that were tallied and printed; complaints about stories; anti-comic letters, which echoed concerns of anti-comic crusaders; responses to anti-comic letters, which echoed fans' concerns; expressions of delight with one story or the magazine in general; and "fan originals"-- gruesome compositions by readers attempting to encode E.C. language and symbols. A few examples follow.

The one-line fan originals made up the majority of the letter pages and were grouped into common themes for publication. For example:

> The following tune titles for our HORROR HIT PARADE were sent in by Don Donaldson of Sylvania, Ohio; Robert Versandi of New York City; John Speight of Yonkers, N.Y.; Judy Louther of Johnstown, PA; Richard Fragola of Southington, Conn.; Betty Farkas of Detroit, Mich.; and Bonnie Brady of Thomaston, Conn.:
> THAT OLD BLACK CASKET
> FROM THE SLIME CAME THE APE
> MY HEART'S FRIED FOR YOU
> YOU SAW ME CHOPPED UP IN THE SCRAPPLE
> KNOCK A FRIED BABY OFF A TREE TOP
> A VAMPIRE, A VAMPIRE (OH, WHAT CAN IT BE?)
> SHE WAS FRIED BUT HE WAS TENDER
> (*The Vault of Horror*, 1954)

Appearing only slightly less regularly were "fan originals," letters expressing satisfaction with the books, the genre, an artist, or a particular story. Letters like this one were common:

> All my friends and neighbors, as well as my mother and dad, think that your magazine is absolutely disgusting. As for ME, all I can say is, Keep up the good work. I like it! I like it!
> --Joseph Amoroso, Jr., Corona, NY (*The Haunt of Fear*, 1953).

After fan letters, the most frequently published were letters seeking to communicate with other fans. The following is an example:

> I would like to start an E.C. fan club, and correspond with other fans. Whoever is interested in the idea should write to me at: R. 66 "D" street.
> --Bob Oravec, Johnstown, Penna. (*Tales from the Crypt*, 1953).

Letters like these demonstrate that readers used E.C. to mediate their community, just as the Smithton women described by Radway used the romance novel publishers to mediate their community. All of these readers were communicating directly either with the editors of E.C. publications, the narrators of the specific books, or to one another. Such conventions as the letter columns and the *Fan-Addict Club Bulletin* provide compelling evidence of the formation of a new community. The E.C. letter columns attest that readers felt a bond to the comic book producers and to the books themselves. In effect, the letters show that young fans did not read the books as the anti-comic crusaders did. Children enjoyed the stories and appreciated the editors' assumptions about their intelligence and savvy; but there is no evidence that they believed that comic books were leading them away from home and hearth.

The Stories and Meaning

The letters are one piece of evidence that demonstrate that a new community of comic book fans and producers was being formed around the comic books. Parents objected to this community, but their fears were cloaked in protestations regarding the stories, not the letters. In order to examine the subject of their concern, and to speculate about the interpretation of stories by fans and critics, it is important to examine a story from the books. For this purpose, a synopsis of "Minor Error" (1952), a representative sample of the books, follows. (The full story is attached as appendix B.) Because the full

flavor of the stories is important, the synopsis is somewhat lengthy. "Minor Error" is introduced and narrated by the Old Witch, the narrator of *The Haunt of Fear*. She explains that new neighbors had moved into an old house, but for three months no one had seen the man or the boy who moved in. But "one summer evening" three neighborhood boys see a child's face in the window. They yell for him to come out, commenting that he looks sickly and "scared stiff," but the child disappears. Moments later, the front door opens and a man carrying a box descends the front steps, his "face a rigid mask set with a cruel expression." The neighborhood children follow him and ask why his child can't come out, and he yells at them to leave. "Ezra ain't never coming out! Never, d'you hear!" He stomps off, leaving the children standing.

They begin to speculate about the contents of the box the man carried. The next day, they read about a murder committed the previous night in which the victim's body "was completely drained of its blood!" One child suggests, "Vampires!", but another insists that there is no such thing. "Oh, no?," the first child asks, "I read in a comic book once . . . I think it wuz called *The Haunt of* . . . " He is interrupted by the third child, who provides information about the only clue--a carton left at the scene of the crime. The children worry that the gruff man they encountered had committed the crime. They decide to watch the old house again that night. If the man leaves again, they will talk to the boy inside.

After he has gone, they bang on the house's door. Ezra opens it, saying that his uncle -- the character with the box who leaves the house -- forbids him to speak with anyone. While they speak, Ezra gets cold and returns to the house for a jacket. He puts on one of his uncle's, which is covered with blood stains. The children conclude that the uncle is a vampire and flee.

The next day, they read of another strange killing, where another empty carton is found beside the body. They decide to follow Ezra's uncle that night. In shadows, they see the silhouette of the man with a club, hitting someone on the head. He removes a gallon jug from the carton, and the next panel shows the childrens' reaction: "Holy Cow! He's drainin' the blood into the jug!" They leave, deciding they have seen enough, and conclude that Ezra, the boy, is kept locked up so that he doesn't reveal the truth about his uncle. They know that the police will not believe their vampire story, and decide that they must destroy the vampire themselves.

The next day, the children break into the house and find Ezra's uncle asleep on the bed. The pictures show only the children, not the victim, as they hammer a wooden stake into his chest. Instead of falling to dust, as vampires should, however, the body remains intact, causing one child to exclaim "Aw . . . you an' your comic books!" They flee the bedroom, looking for Ezra, two of them upstairs, and one down. Suddenly, they hear the child in the basement, "Hey! Down here . . . in the cellar! Oh . . . Golly!" The other two children go down, only to discover Ezra asleep in a coffin. "Ezra slept serenely! His blood-stained lips were curled in a slight smile! The empty gallon jug stood on the floor beside his coffin . . . " "W-we. . . we made a mistake!" says the last child. The Old Witch closes the story, explaining:

> You sure did, kiddo! But that's because you didn't read my comic book carefully! Vampires sleep in coffins . . . not beds! And they drink blood . . . they don't collect it! Yet! Lil' Ezra was the vampire! So was his mommy and daddy! Uncle was just taking care of him because he loved the child! Of course, that meant getting blood for the thirsty lil' tyke! At least till he was old enough to go out and get his own!

The emphasis on meaning and interpretation, especially here by young readers of the E.C.s, calls for observations about how they may have read

them. Such observations, however, are necessarily speculative because essential evidence is elusive. The argument here is that different communities decoded the comic books differently. Evidence of adults' interpretations is fairly clear, but evidence of youth's interpretations is scarce. Children did not write articles about the comic books as adults did. Neither is there a record of youth's public discussions and debates of the books, as there is for adults. To attempt to ascertain what meanings youth of the 1950s gathered from the comic books as an adult researcher is, of course, unreliable for obvious reasons. According to the argument about community formation here, adults of the 1950s could not understand youth's interpretations of the books then; any explanation offered by an adult forty years later -- regardless how informed by theoretical analysis -- could only be far less valid than those offered at the time. The only evidence available on how youth may have read stories like "Minor Error," then, comes from the letters sent to the books. These letters show that readers used E.C.s for a number of purposes--to "escape" from their worlds, experience vicarious thrills, and to connect with the publishers and other readers. They also used the letter columns to establish and maintain new friendship and to mediate their new community. But most letters demonstrated that writers used the E.C.s as their producers meant them to be used--for thrills. They wrote detailing their alleged "effects:"

> . . . I was so nauseated, I ran for the sink, but I loved it. Anytime [sic] I get sick from mags is strictly a pleasure. Retchingly yours,
> --Frank Krueger, Houston, Texas (*The Haunt of Fear*, 1953)

> . . . All of your stories turned everyone in the house a lovely shade of green. My Aunt Minerva was eating when she read your book, and she's been in the regurgitarium (a coined word, so don't throw it up to

> me!) for the past week. I personally think you must be crazy, but aren't we all?
> --Edwin Zureich, Sandusky, Ohio (*Tales from the Crypt.*, 1953)

> . . . Your stories are the most revolting, the most repulsive, the most disgusting stories I have ever read. When I read your magazine, I get sick to my stomach. I'm not alone in this opinion. All my friends think the same thing. Keep up the good work.
> --Marvin Gilbert, Westport, Conn.(*Tales from the Crypt* , 1952)

These letters and others like them carry exaggerations and what seems to be a tongue-in-cheek tone that was created for pleasure of the writer, publishers, and other readers. The very framing of the "effects" is designed to be as outrageous as possible, clearly conveying that they are not real; the letters are satirical, becoming parodies on the stories themselves. They ridicule -- latently if not intentionally -- the notion of harm from comic book reading. The imaginative, playful use of words by the writers is such that even a reader of today recognizes the tightness of the community of readers. Clearly, each writer is having fun with the writing. Further, it appears that letter writers felt completely uninhibited, secure in feeling that no one in the reading community would pass judgment aimed at squelching her uninhibited expression. On the contrary, each letter appears to have been written with pride and expectation of admiration from other readers--and even perhaps as an invitation for another writer to "top it" in outrageousness of expression and description. This uninhibited expression is further evidence that publishers treated their evidence in a special way, according them a status not accorded by parents and other adults at the time. All the letters sent to the E.C.s, in short, suggest that readers used the books for enjoyment, community linkage, and escape.[2]

---

[2]While these letters were chosen by editors for publication and therefore probably reflect their bias, they nonetheless provide valuable insight about how readers used the books.

In this light, then, we can speculate as to how the different groups -- crusaders and children -- might have interpreted a passage like the last one in "Minor Error," beginning with the panel in which the boys are discussing driving the wooden stake through Ezra's uncle's heart and ending with the last panel of the narrative, in which they discover that Ezra, not his uncle, was the vampire. To crusaders, this passage would dramatize innocence, curiosity, and good intentions gone awry. These natural instincts, intended to help them develop into decent adults, have led them to commit the most ghastly of all crimes--murder. And to make matters worse, the fourth child in the story, Ezra, possesses none of the natural characteristics of childhood, for he is a blood-sucking vampire. Clearly, then, crusaders would interpret this passage as subversive of childhood innocence.

To youth, of course, this passage would provide various thrills--of the unthinkable, such as the murder, as one of the boys hammers a stake through Ezra's uncle's heart, of the thinkable, such as the suspense of a second child's discovery -- in the perennially scary cellar -- of Ezra. This passage, in short, packs in thrills of "righteous" murder, guilt, and suspense, and the anxiety of additional horror when the boys discover that Ezra is a vampire. But the passage also provides humor, for the idea to pound a stake through Ezra's uncle's heart came from the boy who read about vampires in a comic book called "*The Haunt of* . . . "; when the mistake is discovered the comic book reader is blamed. "Aw. . . you an' your comic books!" This passage, indeed, the entire story, is an inside joke between the producers of the E.C.s and their readers; a play on the anti-comic crusade itself. In this story, *The Haunt of Fear* has the direct, causal effect that the anti-comic book crusaders attributed to the books. The boys read it and went out and murdered a man, committing what a prominent opponent of the books would call a "comic

book murder." But because they did not understand the language, symbols, and history of the comic book community, adults could glean neither the meaning, nor the joke, of "Minor Error."

Parents and the Comic Book Community

The strongest evidence of the new boundary created by children and comic books probably lies in the actions of these adults and the anti-comic crusade itself. Their arguments make it clear that they believed their children to be forming a new and exclusive community that rejected the consensus values they espoused. Objections raised by parents like writer Marya Mannes (1947), librarian Jean Harker (1948), and self-identified "mother" Myrtle Gourley (1954) were typical examples of anti-comic rhetoric. They reflected fears that comic books would interfere with the transmission of values from parent to child. Mannes, for example, believed that she saw her eight-year old son rejecting high culture and other intellectual pursuits in favor of the books:

> Comic books in their present form are the absence of thought. They are, in fact, the greatest intellectual narcotic on the market . . .
>
> My addicted son [one of 50 million comic book addicts, according to Mannes] has been exposed for all of his eight years to a home full of books, pictures, music and fairly literate talk. He has in his room several books with good clear text and rousing illustrations . . . He would still rather settle down on the floor with a comic book than do anything else. He will listen politely and sometimes with interest when a book is read aloud to him; but his eye wanders wistfully to the corner where the comic books are stacked. Like many hundreds of thousands, however great other attractions, he still wants comics (20).

Mannes' fears were echoed in many articles by women, who saw their children "seduced" by comic books, without knowing why. Professional librarian Harker worried that her children were being drawn away from her culture into a world dominated by comic books, as well.

> Consider my position as a parent, with four children exposed to the comics. Will they be miraculously immune to the disease? Unless we take to the woods, how can I prevent my young daughters from emulating "the chesty 'ladies' in the books she's read" How can I protect my boy from association with other boys his own age, from acquiring their ideas and concepts? I think I can control my children's reading of comics in our home; I cannot dictate reading policies to my neighbors' children. Comic books of all types are in the hands of every child in our neighborhood, and it does happen to be one of the most desirable residential sections of our city (1705-1707).

Harker claimed to understand the effects of the comic books -- they would turn her daughters into "chesty ladies" and her boys into "monsters." But her implied solution, separating her children from contact with others who read comic books, indicates her intense fear of the new community which her children were forming with other comic book readers. In effect, her statements validate that this form of communication was forming a new community.

Other mothers tried in a different way to prevent their children from becoming part of this new community. Myrtle Gourley, for example, decided to infiltrate it by reading and evaluating the comics. As she explained in a 1954 article, she sought to understand the true motivation of comic book readers:

> A short while ago I read several articles that linked comic books with the rising rate and worsening types of juvenile delinquency. "These authors are professional men," I said to myself. "What would be the reaction of a housewife and mother who is an authority only on her own children, the goals she sets up for them, and the methods she uses to achieve these goals?" The answer was simple: "Find out." I decided to steep myself in comic books for a month and let common sense take it from there.
>
> I visited a newsstand, explained to the dealer what I hoped to do, and asked his permission to count, examine, and make notes on the contents of his shelves. He not only gave permission but spent a considerable length of time showing me his stock, explaining his own views, and finding for me an official list of all comics published during a given month.

> . . . Now I had my material, and in I plunged. Housework went by the board as I read, took notes, analyzed, and worked out tables of statistics. I found myself in a slimy swamp from which I could emerge only when I stopped asking myself "Why do they print this trash" and substituted "What can I do about it?" (27).

In light of the fears of Mannes, Harker, Gourley, and other anti-comic book crusaders, it is not difficult to see why Paul Warshow, the subject of his father's "The Study of Man" column discussed at the beginning of this paper, epitomized parents' apprehensions about the comic book community. Reminiscent of Harker's fears, Paul recruited his friends into the Fan-Addict Club, a vital part of the E.C. comic book community. Warshow tried to read the comic books to infiltrate the community of which Paul was a part and learn its language and symbols; but, Warshow could not admit that the comic books were anything but "stupid," thus demonstrating, as Myrtle Gourley feared, that as a parent, he could not succeed. In effect, like thousands--perhaps millions--of middle-class parents, Warshow concluded that not only was his son a member of a "new" community, but that he [Warshow] was unable to even **look at** the mediator of that community, the comic book. For middle-class American children, comic books were the gateway to a community which, in these parents' eyes, undermined the goals they had set out for their children.

The fears of Warshow, Gourley, and Harker, were not without basis. Yet, the critics were unable to articulate those fears with efficacy. Middle-class children were forming a community different than that of their parents, and the debate over meaning in comic books was but one sign of this new community. To children, the books were the mediators for a community of fans, who enjoyed reading the stories and shared similar interpretations of the symbols and meanings in the books. But to the anti-comic crusaders, they were seductors leading their children away from a world they had struggled

for, the books were therefore subversive and dangerous. The crusaders' oppositional decoding of the comic books led them to read messages that sprang from their own fears and insecurities into books meant only to entertain, not to undermine.

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Appendix A

GADZOOKS! MY JOY KNOWS NO BOUNDS! I HAVE JUST RECEIVED MY E.C. FAN-ADDICT CLUB MEMBERSHIP KIT WHICH INCLUDES A FULL COLOR 7½ X 10½ ILLUMINATED CERTIFICATE, A STURDY WALLET IDENTIFICATION CARD, AN ATTRACTIVE EMBROIDERED SHOULDER PATCH, AND A STUNNING ANTIQUE BRONZE FINISH BAS-RELIEF PIN, SO WHAT!

SO WHAT? SO YOU, TOO, CAN JOIN THE

E.C. FAN-ADDICT CLUB!

FOR AN *INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP*, FILL OUT THE *COUPON* AND SEND IT IN, TOGETHER WITH *25¢*. IF *FIVE* OR *MORE* OF YOU WISH TO JOIN AS AN *AUTHORIZED CHAPTER*, ENCLOSE *EACH MEMBER'S* NAME AND ADDRESS, ALONG WITH *25¢* FOR *EACH NAME*, AND INDICATE THE *NAME* OF THE *ELECTED CHAPTER PRESIDENT*. WE WILL NOTIFY EACH PRESIDENT OF HIS *CHAPTER NUMBER*. *EVERY* MEMBER, *CHAPTER* OR *INDIVIDUAL*, WILL RECEIVE HIS KIT *DIRECTLY*... BY RETURN MAIL.

THE E.C. FAN-ADDICT CLUB
ROOM 706
225 LAFAYETTE STREET
NEW YORK 12, N.Y.

SO, ALL RIGHT! SO HERE'S MY TWO BITS. SO MAKE ME A MEMBER, ALREADY, AND SEND ME THE THINGS AND STUFF LIKE WHAT THE KID UP THERE GOT... SO!

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE NO. ____

STATE _____

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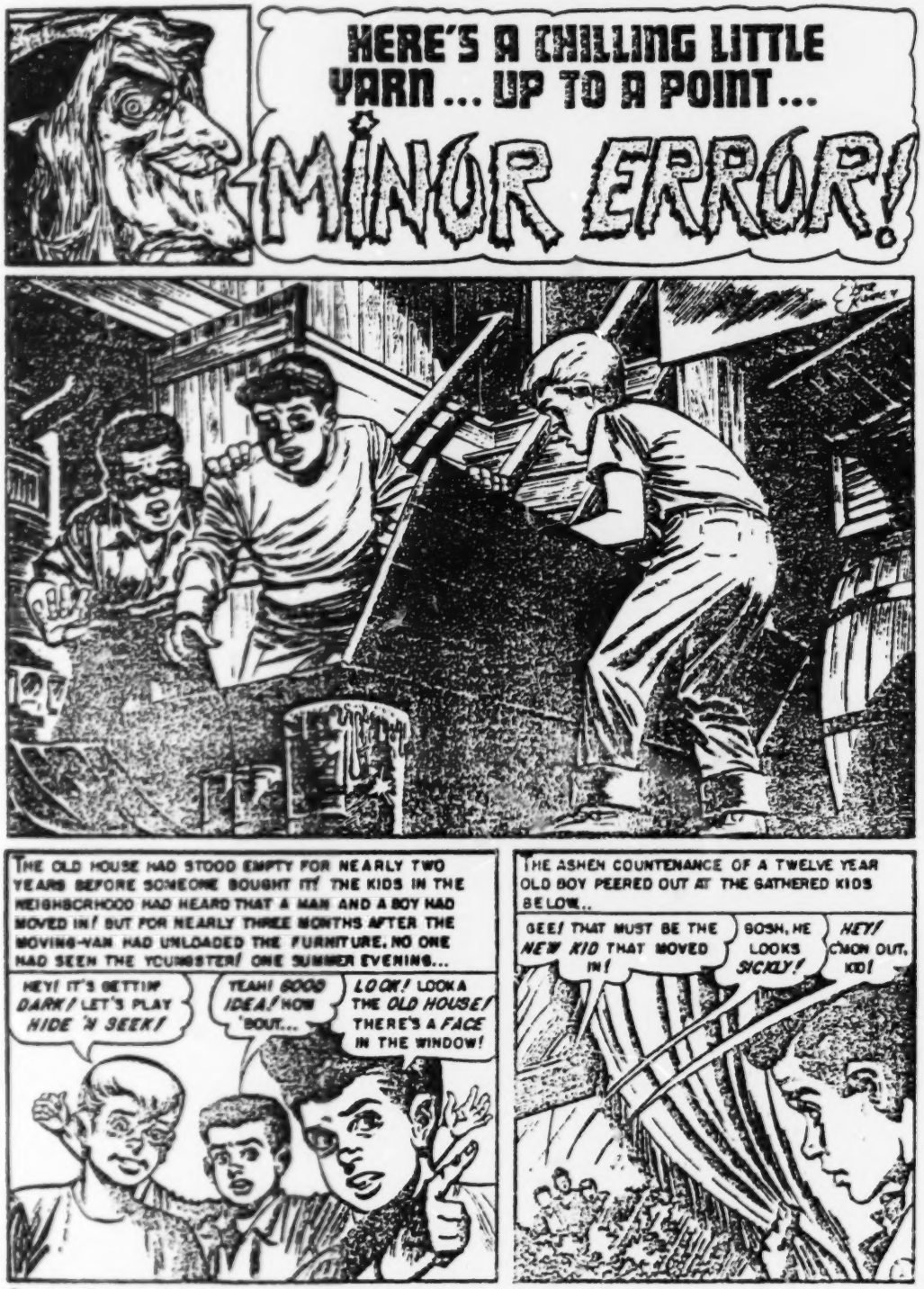
Appendix B


HERE'S A CHILLING LITTLE YARN... UP TO A POINT...
MINOR ERROR!
THE OLD HOUSE HAD STOOD EMPTY FOR NEARLY TWO YEARS BEFORE SOMEONE BOUGHT IT! THE KIDS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD HAD HEARD THAT A MAN AND A BOY HAD MOVED IN! BUT FOR NEARLY THREE MONTHS AFTER THE MOVING-VAN HAD UNLOADED THE FURNITURE, NO ONE HAD SEEN THE YOUNGSTER! ONE SUMMER EVENING...
HEY! IT'S GETTIN DARK! LET'S PLAY HIDE 'N SEEK!
YEAH! GOOD IDEA! HOW 'BOUT...
LOOK! LOOK A THE OLD HOUSE! THERE'S A FACE IN THE WINDOW!
THE ASHEN COUNTENANCE OF A TWELVE YEAR OLD BOY PEERED OUT AT THE GATHERED KIDS BELOW...
GEE! THAT MUST BE THE NEW KID THAT MOVED IN!
GOSH, HE LOOKS SICKLY!
HEY! C'MON OUT, KID!

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THE CHILD'S WIDE-EYED, PALE FACE DISAPPEARED FROM THE WINDOW...
HE'S GONE!
HE LOOKED SCARED STIFF!
LOOK! THE FRONT DOOR...
THE FRONT DOOR TO THE OLD HOUSE OPENED AND A MAN CAME OUT! HE CARRIED A LARGE CARTON TIED WITH STRING...
IT'S THE OLD GUY WHAT BOUGHT THE HOUSE!
GEE! DON'T HE LOOK MEAN?
THE MAN'S FACE WAS A RIGID MASK SET WITH A CRUEL EXPRESSION! HE STARTED DOWN THE STREET...
LET'S ASK HIM WHY THE KID CAN'T COME OUT AN' PLAY!
YOU ASK 'IM! NOT ME!
C'MON! DON'T BE A SCAREDY-CAT! I'LL ASK! HEY, MISTER!
THE HARD-FACED MAN TURNED AS THE KIDS TROTTED UP TO HIM...
YEAH? WHAT D'YUH WANT?
SAY, MISTER! WHY CAN'T YOUR LIL' BOY COME OUT AN' PLAY WITH US? WE AIN'T EVEN MET 'IM... AN' IT'S BEEN ALMOST THREE MONTHS SINCE YOU...
THE MAN'S FACE GREW PURPLE WITH RAGE! HIS LIPS DREW BACK IN A SNARL, EXPOSING SHARP LITTLE DISCOLORED TEETH...
G'WAN! SCRAM! MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS! EZRA AIN'T NEVER COMING OUT! NEVER, D'YOU HEAR? AND DON'T YOU HANG AROUND THE HOUSE! I DON'T LIKE PRYIN'!
GEE! S_SURE, MISTER! WE D...DIDN'T MEAN NO HARM! WE WUZ J...JUST ASKIN'!
THE MAN STAMPED OFF ANGRILY...
THE OLD GRAB!
GOLLY! I'D HATE TO HAVE HIM AS MY OLD MAN!
I SEEN HIM COME OUT EVERY NIGHT AT THIS TIME! MOMMA SAYS HE WORKS AT NIGHT!
WHAT'S HE GOT IN THE BOX?
I DUNNO! HE NEVER CARRIED IT BEFORE!
C'MON! LET'S PLAY HIDE 'N SEEK! IT'S GETTIN' LATE!
2

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THE NEXT DAY THE NEIGHBORHOOD KIDS WERE ALL EXCITED ABOUT THE MURDER THE PREVIOUS NIGHT...
IT SAYS 'THE MURDERED MAN'S BODY WAS COMPLETELY DRAINED OF ITS BLOOD!'
VAMPIRES!
AW, SHUDDUP! THERE AIN'T NO SUCH THING!
OH, NO? I READ IN A COMIC BOOK ONCE... I THINK IT WUZ CALLED THE HAUNT OF...
LISTEN TO THIS! 'A CARTON WAS FOUND AT THE SCENE! IT'S THE POLICE'S ONLY CLUE!'
A CARTON! GEE... LAST NIGHT...
AW, DON'T GO PLAYIN' DETECTIVE!
WELL, HE WUZ CARRYIN' A CARTON!
SO WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?
LATER THAT AFTERNOON...
WHAT'LL WE DO T'NIGHT? HOW 'BOUT PLAYIN'...
HOW 'BOUT SEEIN' IF WE CAN GET TO TALK TO THAT NEW KID!
NOT ME, BOY! HIS OLD MAN LOOKS AWFUL MEAN!
AW, C'MON! THE SOUR-PUSS WORKS AT NIGHT! WE'LL WAIT UNTIL HE LEAVES!
TOWARDS EVENING...
THERE HE GOES! HE'S GOT A CARTON AGAIN!
WE'LL WAIT TILL HE TURNS THE CORNER!
POOR KID! HE NEVER GETS OUT...
FINALLY THE NEW ARRIVAL IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD DISAPPEARED AROUND THE CORNER AND WAS GONE! THE KIDS HURRIED ACROSS THE STREET...
HEY, KID!
HEY, EZRA!
C'MON OUT!
3

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE DOOR TO THE OLD HOUSE CREAKED OPEN AND A PALE WHITE FACE APPEARED...
HI, EZRA!
HI, EZ!
G...GO AWAY! IF MY UNCLE...
YER UNCLE? GOLLY! IT AIN'T HIS OLD MAN!
IF MY UNCLE FINDS OUT I SPOKE TO YOU, HE'LL... HE'LL...
WHY DON'T YER UNCLE LET YOU COME OUT AN' PLAY, EZ?
I DON'T KNOW! HE DOESN'T WANT ME TO TALK TO ANY-BODY!
WHERE'S YER MOM 'N POP? AN' WHY DON'T YOU LIVE WITH HIM?
M...MY MOTHER AND FATHER ARE D...DEAD! UNCLE TAKES C...CARE OF ME N...NOW!
GEE! THAT'S TOO BAD!
HEY, EZ! YER SHIVERING! BETTER PUT SOMETHIN' ON!
Y...YES! I'LL BE RIGHT BACK!
EZRA WENT INTO THE HOUSE! HE CAME OUT AGAIN WITH A JACKET DRAPED AROUND HIS SHOULDERS! A JACKET THAT WAS MUCH TOO LONG FOR HIM...
IT...IT'S ONE OF MY UNCLE'S SUIT-COATS! I DON'T HAVE MUCH CLOTHES!
HEY! LOOK! ON THE JACKET!
BLOOD-STAINS!
HUH? OH! UNCLE IS ALWAYS GETTING STAINS ON HIS JACKETS! I HAVE TO WASH THEM OUT!
STAINS LIKE THESE? BLOOD STAINS?
UH... HUH!
W...W...WELL, S...SLOW, EZRA! WE'LL SEE YUH AGAIN!
YEAH! G'BYE, EZRA! SEE YUH!
AS THE KIDS DARTED DOWN THE BLOCK...
I TOLD YUH THE OLD CRAB DID IT!
HE'S A VAMPIRE!
GEE! GOLLY!

BEST C[illegible]VAILABLE

THE NEXT DAY, THE KIDS READ ABOUT THE SECOND STRANGE KILLING...
JUS' LIKE THE FIRST ONE! BLOOD DRAINED AN' ALL!
AN' THEY FOUND ANOTHER EMPTY CARTON!
WHAT'LL WE DO? IF WE TELL THE COPS EZRA'S UNCLE IS A VAMPIRE...
WE'RE NOT SURE YET! WE'VE GOT TO BE SURE!
THAT NIGHT, THE KIDS CROUCHED BEHIND THE BUSHES OPPOSITE EZRA'S HOUSE...
HERE HE COMES! HE'S CARRYIN' A CARTON AGAIN!
SH-H-H! WE'LL FOLLOW HIM... BUT STAY OUT OF SIGHT!
DUCKING BEHIND FENCES, LAMP-POSTS, TREES, AND ANY OTHER HIDING PLACE, THE KIDS FOLLOWED EZRA'S UNCLE...
HE'S STOPPING!
SOMEONE'S COMIN' THE OTHER WAY!
HE'S HITTIN' HIM ON THE HEAD!
I'M GETTIN' OUT OF HERE!
SH-H-H!
HE'S TAKIN' SOMETHIN' OUT OF THE CARTON!
IT... IT'S A GALLON JUG!
HOLY COW! HE'S DRAININ' THE BLOOD INTO THE JUG!
I FEEL SICK!
C'MON! WE SEEN ENOUGH!
NO WONDER HE KEEPS EZRA LOCKED UP! HE'S AFRAID EZRA'LL TALK!
WE GOTTA DO SOMETHIN!
THE COPS'LL NEVER BELIEVE EZRA'S UNCLE IS A VAMPIRE!
THEN WE'VE GOT TO DESTROY HIM OURSELVES! VAMPIRES SLEEP DURING THE DAY! NOW, HERE'S WHAT WE'LL DO...

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THE NEXT DAY, THE KIDS CLIMBED THROUGH A WINDOW OF EZRA'S HOUSE ARMED WITH A HAMMER AND A SHARPENED WOODEN STAKE...
THERE HE IS! ASLEEP! JUST LIKE I SAID!
PUT THE STAKE OVER HIS CHEST! HURRY!
OKAY! SLAM IT! SLAM IT HARD!
QUICK!
HERE GOES!
A SHRIEK OF PAIN ECHOED THROUGH THE HOUSE AS THE HAMMER FELL UPON THE STAKE AGAIN AND AGAIN...
HE... HE'S... GASP... HE'S DEAD!
HE... HE'S SUPPOSED TO FALL INTO DUST!
AW... YOU AN' YOUR COMIC BOOKS!
C'MON! LET'S GO FIND EZRA!
THE KIDS SEARCHED THE HOUSE... BUT NO SIGN OF EZRA! SUDDENLY...
HEY! DOWN HERE... IN THE CELLAR!
C'MON!
OH_GOLLY!!
THE OTHER TWO BOYS RUSHED TO THE CELLAR! THE ONE WHO'D CALLED STOOD BEFORE THE OPEN COFFIN, STARING WITH WIDE FRIGHTENED EYES! EZRA SLEPT SERENELY! HIS BLOOD-STAINED LIPS WERE CURLED IN A SLIGHT SMILE! THE EMPTY GALLON JUG STOOD ON THE FLOOR BESIDE HIS COFFIN...
H-HE... HE'S ASLEEP!
H-HE'S THE VAMPIRE!
W-WE... WE MADE A MISTAKE!
YOU SURE DID, KIDDO! BUT THAT'S BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T READ MY COMIC BOOK CAREFULLY! VAMPIRES SLEEP IN COFFINS... NOT BEDS! AND THEY DRINK BLOOD... THEY DON'T COLLECT IT! YEP! LIL' EZRA WAS THE VAMPIRE! SO WAS HIS MOMMY AND DADDY! UNCLE WAS JUST TAKING CARE OF HIM BECAUSE HE LOVED THE CHILD! OF COURSE, THAT MEANT GETTING BLOOD FOR THE THIRSTY LIL' TYKE! AT LEAST TILL HE WAS OLD ENOUGH TO GO OUT AND GET HIS OWN!
6

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